

Vipallāsa Sutta

The Discourse on the Perversions

[Perverted perceptions, thoughts and views]

(Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.49/2:52)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2005

Introduction

(1) In many ways, we are what we think. We are the totality of our sense-experiences. That is what we *really* are, but we do not often realize this. We almost always select those sense-data that we like and ignore those we dislike, and with these selected data we build our world: we are a very limited edition of a living book, in that we only

see what we want to see,
hear only what we want to hear,
sense only what we want to sense, and
know only what we want to know.

In other words, we superimpose our own memories, hopes and notions onto our sense-experiences, hiding the true reality of things. Like the proverbial ostrich, we often simply leave our heads buried in the sands of a mishmash of distorted and perverted sense-experiences.

(2) **THE THREE LEVELS OF PERVERSION.** The Vipallāsa Sutta mentions **three levels of perversion**. According to Bodhi, the perversion of perception (*saññā, vipallāsa*) is the most fundamental (that is, the problem *begins* there). The perversion of thought (*citta, vipallāsa*) introduces a more reflective note to the distorted perception, and the perversion of view (*diṭṭhi, vipallāsa*) transforms the thought into a definitive thesis. He gives a well known ancient Indian analogy: a man spontaneously perceives a coiled up piece of rope in the dark as a snake (= perversion of perception); he assumes that what he has seen is a snake (= perversion of thought); he fashions the view that the coiled up object he saw in the dark was a snake (= perversion of view).¹

(3) **THE FOUR MODES OF PERVERSION.** Each level of perversion, in turn, see things in four wrongs ways—the four modes of perversion—that is,

what is impermanent	is taken to be permanent;
what is painful	is taken to be pleasurable;
what is not self	is taken to be a (or the) self; and
what is impure	is taken to be pure.

We tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent. For example, we tend to collect and keep things as if they do not have a shelf life; or we treat others, especially our children, as if they would not mature or change.

We tend to take what is painful to be pleasurable. Or, we keep chasing after pleasures, seeking for a higher fix or a constant relationship, but the result is always the same: we keep missing what we thought we have enjoyed. In this sense, the roots of pain lie in pleasure itself.

We tend to take what is not self to be self. Or, because we fear death, we imagine or hope that there is something “permanent” that survives death, and goes to a place of “everlasting” bliss. But whatever exists can only exist in time, and is as such impermanent.

We tend to take what is impure to be pure. The point is that we do not even have full control of “our own” bodies; so where is this abiding entity called “self” or “soul”? And we think we can improve our luck or cheat “fate” by performing rituals to “purify” ourselves, or that a certain life-style or status makes us pure. The reality is this is all in the mind.

¹ See *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 1999:292 n34. The analogy appears in **Candrakīrti** (600-c650), in *Catuḥśataka Tīkā*, his Commentary on Aryadeva’s “Treatise of Four Hundred Stanzas” (Catuḥśataka, 3rd cent).

(4) **THE INTERACTION OF THE LEVELS AND MODES OF PERVERSION.** The perversion of *perception* is said to be fundamental because the perversion begins with how we recognize or relate to a sense-experience. We tend to superimpose our past conditionings, memories and notions upon present events, so that we never really see what really is going on. We see what we want to see: this is the perversion of perception.

A good example of **the perversion of perception** is how we regard sensual pleasure, especially sexuality (we can also take the examples of money, power, or status). As we mature from infancy into adolescence, our **perception** of sexuality is formed (depending of the kind of values we are exposed to and imbibe). Sexual feeling is very impermanent experience, but we perceive that we can always somehow experience it through our body or that of another. This is the perception of what is impermanent to be permanent.

Although we have never really been satisfied with any sexual feeling—we keep wanting more of it, or keep seeking “better” ones—we never accept the fact that it is really displeasure or pain that drives us to look for more of it. *The more we think about it*, the more we think it is pleasurable. Hence, we perceive what is painful to be pleasurable.

Sexuality is the most selfish act in a person, simply because we always think of our own pleasure and satisfaction. We might even feel that if we have had “good sex,” we are “macho” or “in control” of things. Unwittingly, we exist on the notion that there is a *self* that needs to be satisfied, and the more satisfied it is, the bigger and more powerful it becomes. He have regarded what is not self to be the self.

In this context, “pure” simply means “good.” So since we only recall the enjoyable moments we have had with sex, we regard sex as “good,” as “pure bliss.” Of course, we conveniently forget about having to clean up the mess after the act, or the health concerns that attend it. Thus, we perceive what is impure as pure.

However, if as a married lay person, we accept sexuality as a feeling that arises on a certain occasion that is mutually agreeable, and mutually satisfying, sexuality is a healthy means of communication, if not procreation. The real test (for the lay person) is whether *he still feels all right* (he is control of himself) even when he *does not* have sex when he wants it, or may not consummate the act. Here, it only stops at the perversion of perception.

On the other hand, if we keep thinking about sexuality (or money, or power, or status), about how much we *want* it to *enjoy* it, the preoccupation will worsen the situation to a new level, that is, **the perversion of thought**. Thoughts tend to proliferate, to grow in leaps and bounds, and drives us to seek for more and more sexual experiences. Now it will be *quantity* that counts.

If we do not make an effort to stop this perversion of thought here, but continue to regard sexuality (or money, or power, or status) lasting, pleasurable, self-empowering and good in itself, then we are caught in the rut of **the perversion of view**, which is the deepest end of the perversion trap. In fact, it is the level of addiction.

Under the sway of the four perversions, | you, mind, led around in a circle like a cow:²

Come now, associate with the compassionate Great Sage, | who has cut the bonds of the fetters.

(Tha 1143) = SD 20.9

The bottom line for mental health here is to constantly remind ourselves that everything—especially sexuality, money, power, and status—are impermanent, painful, not self, and impure, in the sense we have reflected here. When we relate to these things of the world in this manner, then we understand them to be what they really are. They can be good servants, even bring us sensual pleasures in a healthy way, until such time we outgrow all desire for them, and seek a higher pleasure—that of spiritual liberation.

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² For another cow analogy, see **Udumbarikā Siha,nāda S** (D 25.5/3:36) = SD 1.4.

The Discourse on the Perversions

(A 4.49/2:53)

The 4 perversions

1a Bhikshus, there are **these four perversions** [distortions] of perception, perversions of thought, perversions of view. What are the four?

1b (1) Taking the impermanent as permanent,³ bhikshus, is a perversion of perception, perversion of thought, perversion of view.

(2) Taking the painful as pleasurable,⁴ bhikshus, is a perversion of perception, perversion of thought, perversion of view.

(3) Taking the not self as the self,⁵ bhikshus, is a perversion of perception, perversion of thought, perversion of view.

(4) Taking the impure [unattractive] as pure [attractive],⁶ bhikshus, is a perversion of perception, perversion of thought, perversion of view.

These, bhikshus, are the four perversions [distortions] of perception, perversions of thought, perversions of view.

The 4 non-perversions

2 Bhikshus, there are these four non-perversions [non-distortions] of perception, non-perversions of thought, non-perversions of view. What are the four?

(1) Taking the impermanent as impermanent,⁷ bhikshus, is a non-perversion of perception, non-perversion of thought, non-perversion of view.

(2) Taking the painful as painful,⁸ bhikshus, is a non-perversion of perception, non-perversion of thought, non-perversion of view.

(3) Taking the not self as not self,⁹ bhikshus, is a non-perversion of perception, non-perversion of thought, non-perversion of view.

(4) Taking the impure [unattractive] as impure,¹⁰ bhikshus, is a non-perversion of perception, non-perversion of thought, non-perversion of view.

These, bhikshus, are the four non-perversions [non-distortions] of perception, non-perversions of thought, non-perversions of view.

3a Those who perceive the permanence in the impermanent, and perceive pleasure in pain,¹¹
Who perceive self in the not self, and purity in the impure,
They are beings fallen into wrong view, mentally deranged, twisted in perception.
They are caught in Māra's grasp, a generation that has no security from the bondage,
Beings who go through samsara, heading for birth and death.

³ *Anicce...niccan ti*, lit "the permanent in the impermanent."

⁴ *Dukkhe...sukhan ti*, lit "the pleasurable in the painful." So Be & Ce. PTS ed has wr *adukkhe...dukkhan ti*, "the painful in the not painful." See §3a (verse) reading.

⁵ *Anattani...attā ti*, lit "the self in what is not self."

⁶ *Asubhe...subhan ti*, lit "the pure in the impure."

⁷ *Anicce...aniccan ti*, lit "the impermanent in the impermanent."

⁸ *Dukkhe...dukkhan ti*, lit "the painful in the painful."

⁹ *Anattani...anattā ti*, lit "the not self in what is not self."

¹⁰ *Asubhe...asubhan ti*, lit "the impure in the impure."

¹¹ The last phrase: *dukkhe ca sukha,saññino*.

3b But when the Buddhas, the light-makers [light-bringers]¹² arise in the world,
 They spread this Dharma, leading to the stilling of pain.
 Those listening with wisdom and with thought, they regain their sanity.¹³
 Who see the impermanent as impermanent, the painful as painful,
 Who see no self in the not self, and impurity in the impure,
 Having accepted right view, escape from all pain.

— evaṃ —

060411; 060806; 070927b

¹² *Pabhaṅ, karā*. See **Pajjota S** (S 1.26) & **Magadha S** (S 2.4) where four kinds of light are said to exist in the world: the sun, the moon, fire, and fifth and lastly, “the Buddha is the best of those that shine: he is the supreme light” (S 1.26/1:15/v66 f = 2.4/47/v260 f). **The Buddhavaṃsa Comy**, explaining the word *jutin, dhara*, says that “the mass of light of the [Buddha’s] physical frame was even more (brilliant) than the sun rising over Yugandhara” (BA 15) and goes on to quote **Pajjota S** (S 1.26) & **Magadha S** (S 2.4).

¹³ PTS & Ce *paccaladdhu te*; Be *paccaladdhā te*. Comy has *paccaladdhāti saka, cittaṃ paṭilabhitvā*. (AA 3:91)